No. 37

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

Impulsively he seized her hand and pressed a passionate kiss upon it. "It is hot in here," she murmured. Let us get a breath of fresh air. Come, let us go outside for a moment."
R. of M. G., No. 37.

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IT SO HAPPENED that the frightful automobile accident chronicled in preceding chapter, took place at the cross-roads a short distance from his estate. News of it was brought to him at an early morning hour by a passing farmer.

Accompanied by several of his men, he hastened to the scene and he was appalled at what he saw.

Three men lay in the ditch with their sculls fractured. Victor Talbot examined them. They were beyond human aid. Dr. Stanford and his two assistants in crime had been called upon to meet their maker.

In one of the practically demolished cars he found another dead man and a woman who still breathed.

"Be careful," he exhorted as his men lifted the limp form of the woman. "I believe there is still a chance of saving her life. Carry her to the house and call the doctor."

Every instruction was obeyed to the letter, and Betty Harding, though unconscious and apparently mortally hurt, was gently born away.

After Victor Talbot had notified the county authorities of the terrible accident, he hurried home.

He was agreeably surprised when he learned from his housekeeper that the injured woman had responded to the doctor's treatment and that she had a good chance to recover.

"Is she conscious, Mrs. Ruggles?" he inquired.

"She was for a little while," the woman answered. "You better go up and have a look at her."

As he entered the room and gazed at the pale, but lovely features of the young stranger, he felt a sudden pang in the region of his heart. She was the very image of the girl he loved.

"Good lord," he muttered, "if I were not so sure that Lillian Crawford is safely at home, I'd be almost

tempted to believe that——"

He did not finish the sentence because his unknown guest opened her eyes and stared at him. For a long moment they gazed at one another. Finally the woman on the bed spoke.

"Where—where am I?" she stammered in a weak voice.

"You are among friends," he told her gently.

"How—how did I get here?" was her next question.

"I had you brought here," Talbot replied sympathetically. "You were in a terrible automobile wreck last night and you are the only one who escaped alive. I am glad that you will recover."

Betty covered her face with her hands as all the horrors of that wild ride came back to her.

"Were they—were they all killed?" she asked.

"Yes. Four men were sacrificed on the altar of the demon recklessness. Why, oh why, will men persist in killing themselves in that manner?" Victor Talbot spoke with a great deal of feeling. "They must have been going at a tremendous rate of speed when the collision occurred."

"It was — it was terrible." Betty was sobbing quietly.

Then he noticed that her hands dropped wearily and that her eyes closed again. Without saying another word he left the room.

"Mrs. Ruggles," he said to his housekeeper. "I am afraid that young woman upstairs is still in a dangerous condition. We ought to have someone here to take care of her. You can't do it yourself with all the work on your hands. Can you suggest someone in the neighborhood?"

The housekeeper thought a moment.

"Perhaps Mrs. Crawford would help you out, Mr. Talbot," she suggested.

He scratched his head.

"Yes, I suppose she would, but I am not at all sure about it," he declared. "At any rate, it is worth trying, Mrs. Crawford has three maids. Perhaps she could spare one of them for a few days."

Mrs. Ruggles looked after her employer as he left the house. There was kindliness and admiration in her heart.

She knew how desperately Victor Talbot was in love with beautiful young Lillian Crawford. And she knew also the obstacles which lay in the way.

"Lillian could not find a better man," she murmured to herself. "And she is a sweet girl. Ah, if they only would let them alone."

In the meantime Talbot, seated astride his horse, was fast approaching his destination.

Before he entered through the gate which led up a shady lane to an imposing country home, he paused. For almost five minutes he stood surveying the immediate surroundings.

Suddenly his fine eyes became alive. The object of his tender thoughts he spied among the flowers in the spacious garden. Dismounting, he led the horse by the bridle and moved slowly up the lane. The girl, utterly unconscious of his approach, was evidently about to pick some flowers.

Talbot paused to tie the horse to a convenient fence post, then vaulted over into the garden and approached the girl from the rear. Very quietly and carefully he came nearer and nearer.

When almost upon her, he called softly:

"Lillian—Lillian."

A startled look came into her eyes as she began to

straighten up. Again he called her, his arms raised, eager to embrace her.

She whirled about. At sight of Victor Talbot, her soft cheeks began to glow.

"Oh, Good morning, Victor!" she cried in a tone which showed clearly how pleased she was to see him. "What in the world brings you over here so early?"

"Glad to see me, dear?" he murmured, ignoring her question.

"You know I am," came back in a whisper.

The birds in the treetops sang merrily and joyously as Talbot took the girl in his arms and kissed her tempting lips. Very tenderly and very reluctantly he released her.

"When did you get back, and how did you enjoy your trip?" he inquired, gazing fondly at her dimpled face.

"Last night, Victor," came back. "And I can't say that I got much pleasure out of the trip. I was too anxious to get back home again. I don't like those big cities and the mad whirl of society. The quiet, peaceful country for me every time."

He reached for her hand and caressed it.

"I missed you terribly, sweetheart," he confessed.

"Really?"

"More than I could ever tell you, Lillian."

"Oh, I am so glad."

Victor made another attempt to take the girl in his arms, but she evaded him with a saucy smile.

"Yes," she reiterated with a roguish twinkle in her eyes, "I am very glad to be home again. And by the way, Victor, have you heard the latest bit of news. Oh, it will surprise you."

"What is it?" anxiously.

"And you won't get angry? Promise?"

"I promise, Lillian."

"Roger Hawkins has asked my stepmother for permission to marry me," the girl told him. "Can you imagine it?"

Talbot's face grew a shade paler, and he inclined his head.

"Yes, I can imagine it quite well," he said very uneasily. "And I can also imagine how pleased your stepmother must have been. Hawkins is the kind of a man who appeals to her. He has the looks, the social prestige and the money.

"I suppose," he added in a strained voice, "congratulations are in order. You'll marry Roger Hawkins, of course. There is no way out of it. And as an old and loyal friend I want to be the first one to wish you all the happiness in the world."

Lillian's eyes filled with tears and glanced at her lover with reproach.

"Don't you think you are rather premature in offering congratulations, Victor?" she said softly. "Oh, I know my stepmother is a social climber and she is a little crazy about Hawkins because he is rich and the recognized leader of his set.

"But he most emphatically is not the man I would choose for a husband. If I marry, it will be for love and nothing else. Social position and the possession of the thing called 'great wealth' are empty bubbles without true love."

As she finished speaking she gave him a look—a long look, that could not be misunderstood.

It was a look that held mute pleading and also an invitation.

Talbot read that look correctly.

With a sweep of his strong arms he gathered her to his breast. The girl did not struggle to release her-

self. Not a bit.

"Lillian!" he cried, "I love you more than any other thing on the face of the earth. During the weeks you were away I have counted the hours until I could see you again.

"Ah,you will never know how I longed for you. And now, that you are back, I shall never let you go away again unless I go with you."

"Go with me?" She smiled up at him. "Why, my dear Victor, you know that such a thing would be out of the question. What would —— "

"As your husband, of course," he interrupted as his lips sought hers eagerly. "You know, darling, I am a bashful man. I never could get up enough courage to ask you to become my wife.

"And perhaps I would not have spoken now but for the fact that Roger Hawkins has formally asked your sepmother for your hand. Answer me now, dear, will you mary me?"

The tears which stole silently down the young girl's peach-blown cheeks were tears of unspeakable happiness.

"Yes, dear, I will marry you," she replied, hiding her crimson face on his shoulder. "I will be your wife because I love you. There never could be another man in my life but you."

Victor Talbot kissed the sweet lips again and again. And thus their troth was plighted.

But the man's happiness was not without a cloud.

This beautiful young girl was still under legal age. Before she could become his wife her stepmother, who was also her legal guardian, would have to be consulted.

And Talbot had a very good reason to fear the result.

Mrs. Crawford was still a fine-looking woman in

spite of her forty years. She was one of those females who are determined to remain forever young.

No one could reproach her for that, for woman in this age of bobbed hair and short skirts pay more attention to their physical fitness than they did in our grandmothers' day.

Before her marriage to Lillian's father, little had been known of the woman.

She was a total stranger in the community, and the gossips had whispered tales of a shady past.. There were unconfirmed rumors of a previous marriage with disastrous result.

But no one could say anything against her after she became Mrs. Crawford.

Lillian, then a sweet young girl of thirteen, tried hard to make her stepmother love her, and it seemed that she had succeeded. But as the girl developed in her beauty and grew in popularity, a change became very apparent.

And when Victor Talbot began to pay serious attention to Lillian, the stepmother gave voice to her disapproval in no uncertain manner.

The reason for this was that Mrs. Crawford, the handsome widow, had fallen desperately in love with Talbot herself.

He was the type of a man who appealed to her sensual nature. At night she would lay awake dreaming of things that could never come true.

Mrs. Crawford, upon numerous occasions, let it be known to Victor Talbot that his presence was not unwelcome to her.

As a matter of fact, she had given him the kind of encouragement one scarcely expects from a decent woman.

And Talbot, an honorable man to the core, had

ignored these glaring weaknesses in the woman. His attitude toward her remained that of a kind friend and a good neighbor.

But the climax had come when the widow, in a burst of uncontrollable passion, threw all reserve to the four winds and kissed him with wild abandon one night as they sat on the veranda.

That had been the end so far as Victor Talbot was concerned. But it was by no means the end of Mrs. Crawford's deep infatuation for him.

Chapter 122

OLD FRIENDS

THE OLD saying that "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," can well be quoted in the case of Mrs. Crawford. Her passionate love for Victor Talbot, meeting with rebuff instead of encouragement, turned to bitter hatred. And that hatred frequently included Lillian.

Quite often, after a fierce quarrel, the young girl had gone to her room to weep alone.

But when it finally dawned upon her that her stepmother was jealous of her, the woman in her asserted itself.

She had gone to meet Victor Talbot again and again without the consent, and often without the knowledge of her stepmother.

He was the ideal of her young girlish dreams, and she vowed that nothing should separate them. For Lillian had a mind of her own.

Mrs. Crawford, as a last resort, had prevailed upLillian to take a trip to New York and stay for a month with a relative.

But the stepmother's hope that the girl would forget Talbot and fall in love with a big city social lion, failed to come true.

And then she went a step further in order to bring about a break in the close relations between her stepdaughter and Talbot.

She attempted to become a matchmaker and she deliberately threw the girl at another man's head.

Roger Hawkins, the chosen tool, had little success

with Lillian. And, judging by the way the lovers looked at his formal suit for her hand, his case was indeed a hopeless one.

As Victor Talbot was holding Lillian in his arms on this beautiful morning, a casual observer would at once have come to the conclusion that these two young people were made for one another.

Neither had a single physical imperfection. They were well matched in every way.

Lillian Crawford was above medium height, and no Mack Sennet bathing beauty could show more curves and grace. Her features were a rare combination of baby-pink, violet blue and brown.

Victor Talbot carried his six feet of height with a dignity not often seen in a man except on the stage or screen.

While his face could not exactly be called handsome, it was nevertheless strong and manly. His eyes, deep-set and very dark, bespoke honesty and great sincerity.

And Lillian Cdawford had no reason to feel ashamed to be this man's promised wife. She glanced up at him shyly — admiringly.

"Don't you —— don't you think you ought to speeak to mother?" she faltered.

"Of course, I'll speak to her," he replied quickly. "But not to-day. This is all so sudden, and I am so excited and happy, that I would surely make a fool of myself if I approached your mother now.

"And that reminds me," he added, his voice again serious, "I did not come over here to make love to you nor to ask you to become my wife."

"No?" the girl smiled.

"I did not Lillian."

"Then what did you come for, Victor?"

"Last night a terrible automobile accident happened down at the cross-roads," Talbot told her. "Four men were killed, and a woman badly hurt. I had the woman brought to the house, where she is now. I was wondering if you folk could spare one of your maids for a few days to act as a nurse."

"How frightful!" Lillian gasped.

"It was frightful.dear. I never heard of an automobile accident like this one. I would not bother you people about help, but I am in a quandary. You see, I have only my housekeeper."

Lillian, her sympathetic nature keenly aroused, swallowed a few times before she spoke again.

"The way mother feels toward you right now, precludes any possibility of her granting your request, dear," she said, a tone of infinite sadness in her voice. "Please, do not ask her. But I will come over and nurse the unfortunate woman. Who is she?"

"That is what I don't know," Talbot answered. "She would not tell the doctor her name, and neither would she reveal where she lives or her family connections. She is somewhat of a mystery."

The young girl remained in silent thoughtfulness for a long moment.

"Alright, Victor," she said presently. "I'll be over in an hour."

"Thanks, sweetheart." He kissed her.

"I am only too glad to help you," she responded. "You know that."

"Thanks again, Lillian."

For some little time neither spoke,but they were not inactive.

Finally Lillian said:

"You better go now, Victor. It would not be the best thing for us if my beloved stepmother found us to-

gether so early in the morning. Fortunately she always sleeps late. But," consulting her wristwatch, "It is now time for her to be up."

Victor Talbot snatched another kiss, then jumped on his horse and rode homeward.

He at once told his housekeeper of his success in obtaining Lillian Crawford to nurse the badly hurt and mysterious patient.

"Have you talked to her yet this morning Mrs. Ruggles?" he inquired.

"Yes, I had quite a chat with her," the woman answered. "I am very sorry for her. She must have passthrough some awful trouble."

"Have you found out her name?"

"No, but I believe that she is in some way connected with the Gordons," came back.

"What makes you think that, Mrs. Ruggles?"

"Because she mentioned Oak Manor once , and she tried to correct herself," retorted Mrs. Ruggles. "Oak Manor is the summer home of the Gardons. But you knew that, Mr. Talbot."

The latter nodded.

"Yes, I know. And I happen to know Philip Gordon very well. I think I'll drive over and have a chat with him. It is quite likely that he will be able to shed some light on the situation. At least I hope he will be able to do so."

"But you were going to the lumber sale this morning," the housekeeper reminded him. "And it begins at nine o'clock. You can still be there on time if you drive your car."

"Oh, yes," Talbot exclaimed. "I must not miss the lumber sale. I can run over to Oak Manor after the sale is concluded."

He walked to the door, then stopped.

"By the way, If Miss Crawford comes, make my excuses, will you, Mrs. Ruggles? I forgot to tell her about going to that lumber sale."

"I'll do that," Mrs. Ruggles smiled.

Victor Talbot smiled in return and left.

As he drove away he was in a happy frame of mind. Lillian Crawford was his promised wife. Never had the world looked so beautiful.

Every farmer he passed on the road received a pleasant "Good morning."

The lumber sale he wanted to attend was being held in a village about six miles from his estate, and directly on the highway which led to Chicago.

He decided to drive to the big city on Lake Michigan after the lumber sale in order to make a number of purchases.

He figured that he ought to be back home about three o'clock in the afternoon, and he smiled to himself as he thought of the magnet that drew him. He felt that he must hurry.

"Dear, dear Lillian," he murmured. "How I love her. I'll make her happy if I can. If that beastly stepmothre of hers interferes, I'll —— " His teeth closed with a snap.

The lumber sale did not take place at the time it was scheduled.

The auctioneer did not arrive until nearly noon, and there was so much bickering over prices that Talbot bought very little and left in disgust.

But his spirit soared ag ain as he drove on toward Chicago.

At a State Street jewelry store he bought a very handsome solitaire diamond ring for his betrothed, with the understanding that it could be exchanged in case it did not fit the wearer.

By the time he had completed his other shopping, the evening shades began to gather.

Since he could not get back home at the time he had hoped to be there, he decided to take his dinner in the city. He loafed about for an hour.

The flashy pictures in front of a movie house drew his attention, and before he knew it, he was seated inside.

The film he saw was an adaptation from the widely read noved "The Dark Star," by Robert W. Chambers. It was the story of a young couple, pledged to one another in marriage.

It appealed very strongly to him because, like in his own case, a stepmother tried to separate the lovers.

The ending was a happy one, and Victor departed in a splendid mood. But fate had decreed that his trials and tribulations would have a tragic ending.

"Now for a fast trip to Oak Manor," he said as he swung his car into the highway. "I hope I'll find Philip Gordon at home."

The clock had just struck nine when he drove through the gate. He had been at Oak Manor before the Gordons took possession of it, and he had no difficulty in following the winding road through the grounds.

As luck would have it, he found the master of the house at home. A servant ushered him into the library.

"Hello, Victor!" greeted Phil heartily when he saw who his late caller was. "Glad to see you."

The two men shook hands and seated themselves.

After apologizing for coming at such a late hour, Victor Talbot at once explained the purpose of his visit. And he did so in a few words.

Gordon appeared to be much disturbed as he listened. He was thinking of his sister Ruth. Could it be possible that she was the mysterious woman who had

been injured in the automobile accident?

It was by no means impossible. His lips were firmly pressed together.

Phil knew about his sister's divorce in New York. And he knew also that she had thoroughly disgraced herself. His mind had been made up that she should never again return to Oak Manor.

He glanced furtively at his visitor as he said in a slow drawl:

"It is very strange that this unfortunate young woman should mention Oak Manor. I am sure she has no connection here. I am inclined to believe that she is one of those loose females who usually delight in wild parties and midnight automobile rides."

Talbot shook his head.

"I don't think so," he said. "The girl shows refinement. There is nothing of the ordinary about her. It is my opinion that she got into some kind of trouble not of her own making."

Gordon trembled slightly.

"Can you describe her to me, Victor?" he asked, not sure of his voice.

The other did so to the best of his ability. And his description of Betty Harding seemed to fit Ruth Gordin many respects.

Phil's uneasiness increased.

More and more he came to the conclusion that this young woman must indeed be his wayward sister. And it was not surprising.

He had not the least knowledge that Ruth had gone to Paris and married Allan Bingham in the gay French capital.

Since he was informed only about the girl's exploits in New York, and the unhappy termination, he guessed that she would make an attempt to come back

to Chicago.

It was quite natural that she should drift homeward after her unfortunate experience in New York. But he could not allow her to remain in the home of a man he respected and liked.

"I —— I think I had better go with you, Victor, and have a look at the woman," he remarked with forced quietness. "I'll drive my own car, for if she is the woman I have in mind, I shall want to bring her back with me."

Talbot looked at the speaker in amazement.

Gordon caught the look.

"Yes, old man," he said, emotion getting the better of him, "I also have a skeleton in the family closet. I might just as well make a clean breast of it. I know I can confide in you."

"Indeed, you can," Talbot returned.

And then Phil unburdened his sorely tried heart. He told his astounded listener all he knew about his sister Ruth —— her romantic marriage to Guy Fillmore, and the disagreements which led to the inevitable divorce.

"I should have gone after her the moment I learned about the fix she was in," he ended. "But I didn't. She wrote me a pitiful letter and I tore it up. What became of her after that, I don't know. I would not be at all surprised to find that the young woman in your home now is my sister."

Victor Talbot placed a hand on Gordon's arm. It was an affectionate move.

"Well, if that should prove to be the case, Phil," he said in a low tone, "please be considerate and kind to her. I would be if I had an only sister. Don't forget that young women these days are often tempted far beyond their strength.

"No matter what this poor girl has done, she still retains her refinement and at least some show of good character. I refuse to believe that the young woman confined in my house is wholly bad."

Gordon made no reply.

He rose slowly and ordered his car brought to the door. Within ten minutes the two men were headeed for the Talbot estate.

It was not very often that two fast moving automobiles drove up the lane which led to the Talbot home at this hour of the night. Victor saw a light in the window of the living room, which indicated that Mrs. Ruggles was sitting up for him.

The sharp ring of the doorbell brought the good woman to the door on the run. She was obviously excited and wrought up.

"Good evening," the master of the house said in his usual kindly tone. "It was nice of you to wait up for me. This," indicating the man at his side, "is Mr. Gordon. He —— "

Here the speaker paused.

"Why, what is the matter, Mrs. Ruggles?" he cried, showing signs of being worried.

"Oh, Mr. Talbot!" exclaimed the housekeeper. "I am so glad you have come. That poor young woman you brought home this morning is gone. She left the house without saying a word."

Chapter 12

THE SPY

QUITE a few things had happened since Lady Bingham set about to rid her son of his undesirable American wife. Ruth, whose wits had been sharpened by Captain Le Mans, was still holding her own. In fact she was doing rather more than that.

During the months which had passed she had fought with every weapon at her command to hold her position. And she was succeeding admirably.

For some inexplicable reason Lady Bingham's shrewdly laid plans had miscarried.

In seeking the aid of Captain Le Mans, she made the mistake of her life. For this very astute and crafty French naval officer was playing a game of his own. It was, however, a dangerous game.

Not a single member of the Bingham household suspected that there was a constant exchange of secret messages between Captain Le Mans and Ruth.

It was plainly Le Mans' purpose to keep the young Mrs. Bingham where she was instead of taking her away. And he did this in such an adroit manner that no one became aware of the real motive behind his obvious determination.

The only one who distrusted Captain Le Mans was the former English naval officer, Allan Bingham. And he had reasons.

One day his mother suggested that they give a ball. The matter was talked about for a long time before it was definitely settled.

It was Lady Bingham who swayed the issue. for another plan had found birth in her brain.

Without revealing the details to anyone, she proceeded to make the necessary preparations.. Her son's wishes were not taken into consideration at all, for he was to absent himself for a certain reason.

Neither did Lady Bingham speak of the proposed ball to Ruth.

All questions were decided between her husband, the old Earl of Bingham, and herself. She had dominated him ever since the day of their marriage, and he had become used to the idea.

The Earl frankly admitted that his wife had the brain and he obeyed her in all things

A ball given at Bingham Manor was always welcomed by everyone privileged to attend. It was a social event of note.

The one to be given by Lady Bingham now was the subject of a little discussion between her husband and herself.

This discussion, which had all the earmarks of being a pre-arranged affair, took place at the breakfast table one morning in the presence of Allan Bingham and his American wife.

""I met Captain Le Mans yesterday and I have asked him to the ball," the old Earl said in the course of the argument. "He gladly accepted the invitation. He seemed much pleased."

Lady Bingham looked up and shot a most furtive glance at Ruth.

Not a word of comment was forthcoming.

"Well," the earl cried, accustomed to some comment when he spoke, "have you nothing to say, you young folks?"

Ruth's lips remained sealed much to the chagrin

of Lady Bingham.

"I have this to say, father," the son spoke up. "It is no business of mine whom you and mother invite, but I don't approve of Captain Le Mans coming for several reasons."

"My boy, I don't understand you," the mother chimed in, her stealthy eyes on Ruth. "Captain Le Mans is no doubt a French gentleman of rank. We are simply doing him a kindness in asking him here. I dare say,my boy, your wife finds his company very charming."

Ruth blushed slightly. If Lady Bingham expected a retort from her, she was doomed to disappointment. Ruth never moved an eyelash.

"Well, I don't like Le Mans," Allan said. "In fact I don't like any Frenchman. Since the war, France is our most dangerous competitor on land and sea. And you, father," turning to the latter, "know this as well as I do.

"You also know something about this Captain Le Mans' reputation. He bears watching. He is much too clever. He also is too skilled with the pen. He is a wizard at copying plans."

"Do you mean to insinuate that Le Mans is a French spy?" the old Earl inquired.

"Exactly that," came back quickly. "The French government must have some good reason for keeping a dangerous man like Le Mans here. And it is being done in spite of the fact that The English government has made several requests for his withdrawal.

"Then there is another, and most important factor that must not be overlooked. This Captain Le Mans has an amazing degree of knowledge about chemicals. He is a menace to England, I tell you."

"My boy," Lady Bingham interposed, slanting another glance at Allan's American wife, "You are doing

Captain Le Mans an injustice. You are prejudiced, and I dare say, blindly prejudiced against the French, and Captain Le Mans in particular."

"I am not prejudiced, mother," Allan defended himself.

"I think you are," she responded. "Please remember that we are not at war with Frace."

"But we are apt to be before many years have passed," Allan answered stubbornly. "All indications point that way."

The subject under discussion was dropped all of a sudden, and for a reason.

Lady Bingham saw that it was useless because Ruth was too shrewd to allow herself to be drawn into the argument.

She wisely refused to commit herself, much to the chagrin of her mother-in-law.

Ruth remained so quiet, in fact, that some hidden danger seemed to lurk behind it. What her thoughts were no one present could guess.

The prediction of Captain Le Mans was coming true. The night before she had been informed by her husband that he was obliged to take a trip to the far interior of Scottland for the purpose of adjusting some business matter for his father.

And in spite of all that, the proposed ball was to be given in her honor. Lady Bingham had made this very clear. On the face of it, it really seemed like a tremendous joke.

Ruth was well aware that the entire afair was merely another attempt to trap her into a compromising position with Captain Le Mans.

At a reception previously given by Lady Bingham the latter's trickery had failed utterly. Captain Le Mans had been present, but Ruth's conduct had always been

above reproach.

But now Ruth's patience was at an end. If Lady Bingham insisted upon having ground upon which to base a separation between herself and Allan, she should have it.

"I'll give them plenty of cause to divorce me," she muttered fiercely to herself as soon as she was once more alone in her room. "And it won't end there. I will make these cursed English snobs wish that they had never set eyes on me."

So when Allan Bingham left the manor one morning to go to Scottland, Ruth did not take the trouble to leave her room in order to bid him goodby.

She was heartily sick of this husband of hers. And not without reason.

There was no longer any doubt in her mind that Allan, with the aid of his mother, was deliberately trying to trick her into compromising herself with Captain Le Mans.

When the night of the ball came at last, English nobility was present in full force.

And when Lady Bingham gave an entertainment or a ball, it was done in princely style.

Of course, Allan Bingham's absence was commented upon, but all questions were answered in a most satisfactory manner by the hostess.

Lady Bingham, by the way, was a past master at perverting the truth. In most cases her explanation was that her son had been called away on a very important matter.

She " was so sorry" that the ball had to be staged without him.

"The dear boy was terribly put out," she gushed. "But business comes before pleasure, you know."

The grand ballroom in the east wing of the manor had been thrown open. Flags and banners were ranged around the walls. Tier after tier of flowers made the big room a mass of fragrant beauty.

Altogether it was one of the most brilliant sights one could imagine.

A complete bower of evergreens hid the orchestra from view. There were pretty little scented fountains half hidden by green leaves, and ther were pretty nooks among roses and tropic plants.

These nooks were convenient hiding places for lovers,young and old.

Ruth had also made some preparations for this event. Was this ball not being given in her honor? She smiled at the thought.

She wore a magnificent gown made of soft, clinging silk. It was cut shamelessly low and revealed her wonderfully well rounded shoulders and neck. The skirt was short — extremely short.

Her wealth of dark hair was held together by a bright bandeau, studded with diamonds. In their brightness they were matched by her eyes — eyes that gleamed like mystic stars.

She was the most daringly arrayed and the most ravishingly beautiful woman that ever graced —— or disgraced the Bingham Manor ballroom.

Captain Le Mans arrived late. ——

He stood amazed as he entered the wonderful room. Often as he had been to Bingham Manor, he had never seen the ballroom in the east wing.

But he soon ceased to think of the splendor displayed when he saw Ruth.

In his estimation she was the most beautiful woman in London. She was uttery incomparable. She was the peer of her sex.

He was actually dazed when his eyes perceived her, standing there like a queen, with a cold smile hovering about her lips. For a moment he was afraid to approach her.

Then sudenly she looked in his direction. Her eyes seemed to pass over the assembled guests and rest on him.

They seemed to invite him and bid him welcome. He went to her quickly and received the same half-proud, half-sweet greeting she gave to others.

"I shall be at liberty soon, Captain Le Mans," she said in a low voice. "Do not go too far away."

As she uttered these words her face flushed hotly.

Captain Le Mans spoke to a few men he knew slightly. There was not a single one who greeted him with any warmth except Lady Bingham.

"You are quite the handsomest man here to-night, captain," she told him behind her fan. "I know you will enjoy yourself."

"The indications are that I will, my lady," he replied, his glance straying in the direction of Ruth. "By jove, your daughter-in-law is a most wonderful creature."

"Ah, I am glad you think so," she responded quickly. "I wish you would keep her cheered up during the evening. Her husband is away, you know. I didn't know what inclines me to commit her to your care. You can amuse her if any man can."

The last sentence was accompanied with a smirk unworthy of a woman of Lady Bingham's rank.

"You may rest assured that I shall do my very best," Le Mans said. "I am positive my heart will be in endeavors, dear Lady Bingham. Thanks for your expression of confidence in me."

Ruth made a sign and he joined her.

"Shall I introduce you to some of those pretty girls?" she asked. "English girls are very intellectual. Of course," she added mischievously. "You know that. And that is why you are so fond of them."

"I thank you very much," he replied, "but I do not care in the least for these English girls. And you know that also."

She raised her eyebrows in pretended wonder.

"Surely you'll want to dance, captain, don't you?"

"No, I do not," Le Mans responded.

"Then why did you come to the ball?" Ruth inquired looking at him archly.

"I do not know, unless it was for the pleasure of beholding the most beautiful woman I have ever met. I am in her presence right now."

"Oh, you flatterer," she touched him with her fan.

"Mrs. Bingham," he said after a slight pause. "I do not know whether I am what the world calls a good dancer or not——"

She looked at him with sudden, irresistible mischief in her eyes, and looked at the tall, stalwart figure that, after all, was more fitted for the battle field than the ballroom.

"I am quite sure that you are not," she said naively.

His face fell.

"Then I am afraid I must not ask the favor for which I was about to plead," he said ruefully. "It was that you would give me one dance, only one. It would be something for me to remember as long as I live."

"Only one?" she smiled. "You are very moderate."

His face lighted with sudden joy — a joy that flashed from his eyes to hers like an electric shock.

"Is it possible that you will give me one?" he

asked.

Again she smiled.

"Will you, Mrs. Bingham?"

"I will, Captain Le Mans."

She held out her daintily arranged program to him and he chose a waltz.

"A waltz?" she cried, pleased. "You shall have it. But now you must excuse me. You see, this ball is given in my honor. I have been requested by my mother-in-law to opoen it with Lord Drummond. Let me introduce you to some of the young ladies."

"No," the Captain exclaimed, "do not deprive me of two pleasures."

"Two pleasures? What are they?"

Captain Le Mans leaned closer.

"The first one is watching you dance," he told her, "and the second is thinking of what you were kind enough to promise me."

It was almost an hour before the time came that he could claim her.

The notes of a dreamy waltz floated through the room, stirring his heart, stirring his every nerve. Ruth was standing close to the door, talking to a uniformed British naval officer.

Le Mans walked up to her.

"Mrs. Bingham," he said, bowing very low, "do you remember?"

Ruth gave him her entire attention.

"Yes," she replied. "Indeed I remember. I have done all my duty dances."

"You don't consider this one with me a duty dance, do you?" he whispered.

Ruth shook her head.

"No ,my dear captain," she smiled. "This one is for real enjoyment."

If she could have seen his face she would have noticed how deadly pale it grew as his arm touched her beautiful figure.

Then they floated through the room, the lovely brilliant face so near his own, the dark hair almost touching his.

The graceful figure, and the faint perfume, all combined to make it one of the greatest pleasures he had ever experienced.

After the dance was over, they found a convenient spot. Captain Le Mans was panting, and Ruth was smiling into his rapt face. She was perhaps breathing a little harder than her companion.

Impulsively he seized her hand and pressed a passionate kiss upon it.

Ruth made no objection.

"It is hot in here," she murmured. "Let us get a breath of fresh air. Come, let us go outside for a little while."

Captain Le Mans nodded and rose.

Silently and tenderly he drew the wrap around her shoulders. Once she turned and faced with one of her rare smiles.

There was hardly a breath of air stirring as they walked from the ballroom to the broad terrace. They were alone at last.

As Captain Le Mans glanced about for a place to sit, Ruth guessed what was going on in his mind. Without saying a word, she drew him to the far end of the terrace, where they found seclusion and comfort on a bench behind a group of pot flowers.

"Well," she said, turning to him as soon as they were seated, "your predictions have come true. Every one of them."

The Frenchman looked at her.

"You mean?"

Ruth tossed her head.

"The stage has been set by my dear mother-in-law. I am to commit some fatal blunder with you and then —— "

Captain Le Mans' laugh made her pause.

"Does it seem funny to you, Captain?" she asked, slightly vexed.

"It does," he acknowledged.

"Not to me," said Ruth irritably.

"It strikes me very funny," replied the Frenchman. "Your mother-in-law, in her great kindness has chosen me as the man to assist you in committing that blunder. What astupid old woman she is. She does not realize that——"

"Hush!" Ruth warned. "Someone is coming."

A dark figure in a long wrap approached, passed them and turned back.

It was a woman.

"What a wonderful night it is, Captain Le Mans," Ruth remarked casually. "It seems the summer nights are all beautiful in England."

"England is a beautiful country, Mrs. Bingham," the captain responded, taking his cue.

"I like it very much, and I would be quite happy if I did not get homesick so often," Ruth said in a loud tone, and keeping an eye on the slowly receding figure. "I am afraid I shall have to take a trip to the dear old U. S. before long."

Captain Le Mans made no reply.

He was also watching the dark figure as it very slowly disappeared.

"That was Lady Bingham," he whispered.

Ruth nodded.

"No doubt about it," she answered angrily. "The

old cat! I hate her!"

"I don't blame you," the French naval officer returned as he moved a little closer. "Now, that we have been virtually thrown at each other's head, what are we going to do about it?"

"Anything you care to suggest," Ruth replied recklessly.

He gave her a swift giance.

"You —— you don't mean that, Mrs. Bingham. You can't mean it."

"And why not, Captain Le Mans?"

"Because —— because you are not the type of a woman to ——"

She stopped him with:

"My husband must have just cause for divorce. I'll give it to him."

"Would you destroy yourself to please people who can be so hateful toward you?" Captain Le Mans asked. "Would you?"

"Not exactly that," Ruth responded, averting her flushed face. "But —— "

"Mrs. Bingham," he broke in, a strange tremor in his voice, "I wish I could make you understand just how I feell about this nasty affair. If I were what the English call a 'Rotter' I would at once proceed to make love to you.

"God knows you are beautiful enough. Without wanting to flatter you, I will say that you are the most lovely —— the most tempting woman I have ever met. But I coulld not make love to you under the conditions existing now."

Her eyes lowered before his.

She sank back into her seat and stared at the floor for a moment. As she looked up she noticed a very slight movement among the leaves of the plants.

With a quick motion she put a finger to her lips and rose. She had hardly taken the first step toward the flowers when the quick patter of feet became audible and died away.

Captain Le Mans had also risen.

He looked magnificent as he stood there in the pale moonlight, angry, and raised to his full height. The gold on his uniform glittered.

For the first time Ruth gazed at him with undisguised longing in her eyes. And then an audible sigh escaped her parted lips.

The continued silence between them was fraught with danger.

Captain Le Mans broke it.

"You see, we are being watched like two naughty children," he said, keeping himself under control. "That sort of thing makes my blood boil. I could throttle the sneak whoever it was."

Ruth's big eyes, which had at first been snapping, were now moist with tears.

Her wandering hands strayed upward until they reached her hot face. It took her some time before she regained her composure sufficientlly to spea.

"I think it is a shame that I must be sujected to this kind of treatment," she sobbed. "Oh, I wish I had never seen that woman."

When the Frenchman's strong arms went around her, she nestled into theem like a frightened child. Ah, it was so good to have someone to comfort her — someone to sympathize with her.

Never before in all her young life had she needed a friend she could trust as she needed one now. She liked Captain Le Mans. He had shown himself to be a real man. She was dangerously close to loving him.

Continued in next number

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